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Book Review: Getting to Graduation: The Completion Agenda in Higher Education

Robert Kelchen
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Book Review: *Getting to Graduation: The Completion Agenda in Higher Education*

By Robert Kelchen

Robert Kelchen recently received his doctorate from the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Starting the fall 2013, he joins the faculty of Seton Hall University, NJ as an assistant professor.

In *Getting to Graduation: The Completion Agenda in Higher Education*, Andrew P. Kelly of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), Mark Schneider of the American Institutes for Research, and AEI bring together a diverse group of scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to examine the promises and pitfalls of the completion agenda in higher education. This book is set in the context of a strong push by the Obama administration and private organizations such as The Bill & Melinda Gates and Lumina Foundations to dramatically increase college completion rates in America, to as much as 60 percent by 2025.

The first section of the book details the challenges that institutions and policymakers must face in order to increase college attainment rates. Arthur Hauptman, an independent public policy consultant, begins by noting that America's educational attainment rates compare favorably to other developed nations and have continued to increase over time. This is in spite of the perception that attainment rates have been stagnant for decades. The common college completion rate statistic is also inaccurate, he notes, because it combines bachelor's degree attainment (in which America does very well) with associate's degree attainment (in which America does not perform as well). In any case, the "big goal" of a 60 percent college completion rate is implausible given current educational trends and Hauptman urges policymakers to set more reasonable goals.

Matthew Chingos, a fellow at the Brookings Institution's Brown Center on Education Policy, follows with a discussion of whether improving the academic match between students and colleges would help increase bachelor's degree completion rates. He uses data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study to estimate the potential impacts of assigning students to attend colleges more in line with their academic ability. Although this simulation does reduce the completion gaps between high-socio-economic status (SES) and low-SES students, better matching would increase the overall completion rate by only 0.2 percentage points. Chingos concludes by mentioning possible ways to increase graduation rates through technological and pedagogical innovations, but this feels like an attempt to grasp for anything that could work to increase graduation rates instead of a carefully-considered set of policies.

The essays in the second section of the book address the potential of sub-baccalaureate programs such as community college programs, job training, and apprenticeships. Thomas Bailey, professor of economics and education at Teachers College, emphasizes the importance of associate's degrees and certificates toward increasing overall educational attainment. Due to capacity constraints of many community colleges, he notes that any

increases in attainment must result from increased completion rates. He then highlights one-year-plus certificate programs as potential models on account of their high completion rates and labor market benefits. Bailey also discusses programs that have worked to increase completion rates at individual colleges, but the results are not so promising once a program is brought to scale.

Brian Bosworth, founder and president of a private consulting firm, repeats Bailey's points on the importance of certificate programs in raising college completion rates. He also exposes the wide variation in certificate completions across states and degree programs; something which policymakers should consider while setting goals. He uses data from several federal sources to estimate both the cost and the economic returns to certificates, which is challenging given the lack of precise data on types of certificates. Bosworth concludes with a discussion of the successful Tennessee Technology Centers, which are known for their high completion rates and solid job placement records.

Diane Auer Jones, vice president for external and regulatory affairs at Career Education Corporation, follows with a discussion of an underutilized aspect of the American education system—apprenticeships. While apprenticeships are common in much of Europe, fewer than 500,000 students are enrolled in apprenticeship programs in the United States. She emphasizes the importance of reducing the stigma of apprenticeship programs through steps such as allowing apprentices to qualify for the same discounts and financial aid as college students. She also makes a recommendation to develop more apprenticeship programs in fields such as communications and banking, something which might spark a debate with colleges and universities.

The third part of the book focuses on the relationship between policy and college completion. Eric Bettinger, associate professor of education and economics at Stanford University, discusses the extent to which financial aid can increase degree attainment. He does an excellent job summarizing the body of evidence on the effectiveness of need- and merit-based financial aid in increasing college enrollment and persistence rates. While financial aid does help students go to and stay in college, it is unclear whether providing additional aid to students would pass a cost-effectiveness test. Bettinger then examines strategies to use financial aid to increase college attainment in more cost-effective ways, but the problem is that the most innovate interventions are small and not universally applicable. He sees more promise in better targeting aid dollars to students on the margins of attending or completing college.

Bridget Terry Long, professor of education and economics at Harvard University, examines remediation policy in light of various state-level restrictions on the practice. She documents the widespread nature of remediation before attempting to estimate its costs for the few states with available data. She then examines the three primary questions of remediation policy: Should remediation occur? If so, where? And who should pay for it? The highlight of her essay is an examination of whether

there are diverse effects for remediation courses, something which colleges should keep in mind.

Josipa Roksa, associate professor of sociology and education at the University of Virginia, follows with a surprising look at credit portability. While policymakers and colleges are concerned about the difficulties students face transferring courses for credit, her research finds that credit portability is not a serious concern for most students. She shows that transfer students do not earn many more credits than students who did not transfer, although the time to degree does increase somewhat. This suggests that among students who transfer, better articulation policies are unlikely to increase graduation rates by much. However, she does not discuss the possibility of increased transfer rates as a result of transfer policies which are viewed by students to be more favorable.

The final section of the book includes lessons learned by practitioners in three states. Elaine Delott Baker of the Community College of Denver discusses her experiences working on three initiatives to improve the outcomes of community college students. Although the initiatives were all successful in the short run, she notes that issues of implementation, dissemination, and program fidelity should all be considered. Additionally, she emphasizes the difficulty of evaluating outcomes once grant funds are exhausted.

Geri Hockfield Malandra, formerly of the University of Texas System, provides insights into Texas's ambitious plan to close the achievement gap between racial and ethnic groups within the state, and also improve Texas's standing compared to other states. Texas already had an ambitious outcome-based accountability system in K-12 education, which was then modified for the higher education system. She notes that in order for an accountability system to be successful, the goals must be flexible across colleges and that stakeholders must be included in the discussion.

Richard Petrick, formerly of the Ohio Board of Regents, details the long history of performance-based funding in Ohio. Like in Texas, different types of campuses are held to different performance goals, depending on their mission. The key to Ohio's success in maintaining their program has been continued funding in lean economic times, something which has not been the case in all states.

The book provides a good summary of where America stands regarding the college completion agenda, but several key points are not discussed in enough detail. While a few authors briefly mention cost-effectiveness, this should be a central theme of the book given the goal of producing more graduates in tight budgetary times. Data availability is a serious concern for conducting many cost-effectiveness analyses, but this setback should be noted as a key area for improvement. The possibility that perverse effects (such as reduced academic standards) might result from a push for more graduates should be addressed, as it is one of the most common questions asked by college administrators. Additionally, more authors should have discussed issues regarding bringing programs to scale.

Kelly and Schneider close with a few "game-changing" ideas in higher education: online courses, competency-based learning, and the growth of the for-profit sector. These ideas deserve greater discussion and should be the feature of a follow-up book focusing on best practices to increase college enrollment and completion rates.